



# Pick Your Path to Health

## Relearning Relaxation

Relaxation- it's a state that we all crave, but one that often becomes harder to attain as we get older. How we long for some moments when our bodies are still and our minds are at rest-fully calm and quiet. When our lives are so chaotic, filled with critical responsibilities, relaxation can become an elusive memory from yesteryear. One we vaguely remember from long-ago days when we took candle-lit bubble baths and vegetated on a summer's beach.

The good news is that relaxation can be relearned even when our days are booked with responsibilities. By carving out just a few minutes each day, we can begin to truly enjoy the benefits of stillness. This can be a challenge for African-American women, who take on so many multiple roles and responsibilities. So make it a priority!

### A special concern

Research from The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS), which leads Federal efforts to treat mental illnesses by promoting mental health and by preventing the development or worsening of mental illness when possible, shows that relaxation and stress reduction techniques, when used in combination with traditional treatments, like therapy and medication, can do wonders to help combat many health problems, including insomnia, chronic pain, depression, panic disorders, stress, and alcohol and drug addictions.

As a bonus, research now tells us that relaxation is also a well-documented preventive tool. "When you consider that stress, anxiety, obesity, and high blood pressure are just a few of the ways that a chaotic life can take its toll on the body, you realize the importance of taking a few moments to relax each day, says Frances Page, RN, M.P.H., Deputy Director of the Office on Women's Health in the U.S Department of Health and Human Services. "When you consider that African American women are at a particular risk for some of these illnesses, you realize that there is no time like the present."

Women's needs for relaxation are so wide spread that there are now national programs that teach relaxation skills specifically to women. The

Mind Body Medical Institute in Boston, Massachusetts, for one, has a "Center for Women's Health" program that offers women retreats and programs on how to employ mind/body approaches and improve personal well being. Programs include a mind/body infertility retreat, a coping skills for parenting program, and a class that teaches women how to "challenge the change years" and best handle the physical and emotional changes that come with menopause.

### **What forms of relaxation work best?**

We all have our personal, informal, methods of relaxation. A good book, a quiet walk, a favorite movie by the fireplace. By all means, dive right in if those techniques work for you. You may also want to consider contacting a professional or checking out a book from your local library to help you learn other ways, such as those recommended by CMHS below, to "retrain" your body and invite increased relaxation and stress reduction into your life.

- Biofeedback—The simple act of breathing is actually not as obvious as it may appear. How we breathe has a huge impact on our emotional state, and when we relearn deep breathing techniques, we are better able to handle anxiety, stress, and fear.
- Guided imagery and visualization—Visualizing a scene in detail where all your surroundings are peaceful, quiet, and soothing is a great way to bring about inner calmness into your life. Whether it's the sights and sounds of a wooded path, a moonlit beach, or a snowy mountaintop, imaginary scenes can bring about real-life relaxation.
- Massage therapy—We all know how good a deep massage feels on aching muscles. Science also confirms that rubbing, kneading, brushing and tapping a person's muscles can help release tension.

### **Where do I sign up?**

Making a commitment to relax more is one of the most simple, stress-free steps you can take. It means sitting back, taking a load off, and *not* feeling guilty. Relaxation is good for you, after all. So do it. Unplug the phone; put down the "to do list." And enjoy this wonderfully relaxing step to better health.

*Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of*

*Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/> To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."*